



Carto



👁 22 ✓ 2 ★ 3

Chapter 1 by Luke Meyers

I unwrap the fresh pack of cards. The end flap snaps back crisply as I flick it open. I raise the pack to my nose and inhale the scent of freshly cut paper. Lowering my hand, I invert the box and let the deck slide out and land heavily in my other hand.

I drop the box and take up the cards in both hands, feathering them back and forth and feeling their motion. They are crisp, smooth; their weight is perfect. The backs are a study in black and white, a twisting Escherian pattern that somehow achieves rotational symmetry. Squaring the pack, I run my fingers along the gentle, ridged texture of the end of the pack and riffle them slightly. Yes.

I break the pack in halves and rest them on the table, one corner peeled up. Riffle shuffle, bridge, bridge again, square the pack. Another riffle, then another. Next I take the pack in right hand and draw them a few at a time into my left; my fingers take on a practiced grip to steady the cards, pinky supporting the bottom. Overhand shuffle, several times, fast. I love what my hands are doing. I love this ritual. But I am wasting no time. Soon, I have shuffled enough and begin to deal.

I lay out twelve cards in a simple tableau; I know this layout better than my own name. The cards, though, are unfamiliar. Every pack is different. In over a decade of carto, I've never seen so much as a card in common between two decks. The images are intricate and astonishing; each one seems like it would have taken a skilled artist many hours. It seems impossible that each ten-dollar pack could be the result of such devoted labor, but their appearance is only the

first of their mysteries

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There are themes. Today the cards are black and white, set against a dark background. Five different suits are visible. The first card I see bears a slight, like a letter in an unearthly alphabet written in gold, set against a dark background. Everything I see is completely unfamiliar.

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Having dealt the tableau, I force myself to pause and steady myself. I need my best mind for what comes next; I can't be distracted with worry, or that worry will take over and dominate my experience. I close my eyes and sit back, taking ten deep breaths with all the focus I can muster. Ten more, and then ten more again; I have learned to be sure. I know when I am ready, and I take up the remaining pack.

I begin to deal out more cards onto the existing foundations, starting by covering each card in turn. As I do so, a familiar feeling begins to creep over me. My surroundings seem to vanish into murk, and I am deeply connected with the cards and my tableau. It consumes my attention with unnatural fullness.

The sigils on the cards seem to brighten, as if the light was always shining directly upon them. They appear nearly animated in their vibrance, and I feel as if something within them is reflected in some hidden part of my mind, pulsating weirdly just outside the edge of awareness.

My rhythm changes. Without following any rules I know, I start skipping piles as I deal. Soon, I put the pack down and begin moving cards around. I swap cards, flip them over, make bigger and smaller piles. I continue in this way for some time, performing actions that would have no meaning to any onlooker. Indeed, they have no meaning to me.

As my hands busy themselves with the tableau, though, my mind drifts along tendrils of warm yearning into a strangespace as bizarre as any I've seen. If the cards in each pack are new artwork, the strangespace is like a new art form every time I experience it. It builds within me like a dream upon the weary, but I am alert as I feel my consciousness eject outward from my eyes and into a rushing hall of psychic mirrors, a sea of murmurs and echoes.

It is a soup of thoughts. Ideas and images strike me at random from all angles, and I can sense more of them whizzing around me between other minds, some of which are also myself. I am a fugue, a multimind, a confused wretch humbled by his own limitations. I cannot exist for long here, I cannot begin to process what it is. All I can do is listen for a message, and try to

remember

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Chapter 2 by Intellikat

The rain. It beats down on

Boss

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And yet he stands

The man turns.

No need to be here.

No. Need. Goddamit you're right.

He stalks off toward the solace of a squad car, all blinking lights and girded by yellow barrier tape. Slumping into leather seat, wet hat to empty passenger's side. The tablet flares up, he unlocks the screen. Information for him to sift through. A call comes in.

David.

Yeah.

No need for you to be out there.

Second time I've been told that. Rest assured I'm doing very little of anything here.

Leave it to the whippets.

Plenty of them. Barking.

Anything you found.

There's nothing here. What there may have been is long since gone. This rain will take a lot with it.

Go home David.

I'm there already.

The call ended. The information still being sifted at fingertips. A tap at the window.

Inspector. Look at this.

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Through the window of the squad car the officer caught a playing card torn at the edge. David Anders, in his 35th year of age, almost seems to carry a warmth with it, if that could be possible.

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Where.

Near the body. Caught in the pavement.

He changes his mind and pushes his heavy frame to exit the car. This card, however strange, is not unique to the old detective. He has seen its kind before, and his pulse quickens.

Let's have another look at the body.

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